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ABSTRACT

This document highlights progress in sex equity over the past 15 years, examines the current status and trends, and describes the role of counselors and educators as change agents in reducing sex bias. (NB)

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HIGHLIGHTS ...An ERIC/CAPS Digest

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Sex Equity in Guidance and Counseling

Introduction

Societal changes over the past 15 years have brought a new awareness of the need to expand opportunities for women and minorities. Sex equity received a big boost with the passage of the Education Amendments of 1972 and the Women's Educational Equity Act. Several legislative and private initiatives gave impetus to the creation of hundreds of programs in schools, colleges, and communities to reduce bias and expand options for girls and women (McCune & Matthews, 1978). These have been complemented in recent years by a few programs which address new options for boys and men. It is the purpose of this document to highlight progress in sex equity, including current status and trends, and the role of counselors and educators as change agents in reducing sex bias.

Counseling-Based Programs

There seems to be agreement that counselors should play a major role in helping to remove barriers and create options for both sexes and that nonsexist counseling is essential for optimal growth of students. Yet, it is clearly not the role of counselors alone. Indeed, all types of personnel have collaborated or worked independently to achieve sex equity. Project BORN FREE (Build Options, Reassess Norm, Free Roles through Educational Equity), a multimedia training program for counselors and educators working with children, youth, and adults, was one of the first to link career development, sex-role stereotyping, and social change and to emphasize changes in roles of both women and men (Hansen, 1981). While interest grew in sex-equity throughout the 70's, by the 80's, a call for new school reform totally ignored sex equity issues, and from 1980 on, emphasis on sex equity in education began to diminish. While much progress had been made, the problem was far from resolved.

Current Realities

There is no doubt that new options have opened up for women and that the equity gap has begun to close in secondary school subjects, in higher education access, and in the workforce (NACWEP, 1988). Nonetheless, problems remain, especially for girls and women who are minorities, poor, disabled, and outside the opportunity structure. Counselors and educators are in a position to provide clients and students with realistic information concerning future life role options and to help them with adequate preparation for these future roles. In doing so, it is essential that counselors and educators possess accurate information on important societal trends. Recent data indicate that:

- Women today comprise 44% of the labor force;
- The average woman can be expected to work about 30 years of her life;
- In 1986, of the married couples with families, over half were dual earner couples;
- Most single parent families are maintained by women (Women, Public Policy, and Development Project, 1987).
- In the year 2000, 80% of new entrants into the workforce will be women, minorities, and immigrants (Gallup, 1988).

Adolescent Sex-Role Attitudes

While the interventions of the past 15 years doubtless have had an impact on sex equity (and program evaluations and statistics attest to this), there is abundant evidence that the impact of socialization on sex-role attitude is deepseated (Hansen, 1984), and a huge gap still remains between attitudes and reality. For example, according to recent studies, the expectations of adolescents and young adults concerning their future life roles are in sharp contrast with the statistics on current societal realities. When Herzog and Bachman (1982) investigated the sex-role attitudes of 3,000 high school seniors, they found relatively traditional attitudes toward family roles. Both males and females were opposed to women with small children working outside the home. They also expected a traditional division of labor, with women primarily responsible for the children and men bearing financial responsibility for the family. Similar findings are reported in an extensive study of 14-18 year old Minnesota high school students regarding their plans for future educational, work, and family roles (Hedin, Erickson, Simon, & Walker, 1985). These studies, and numerous others, have shown that young people's career choices still reflect stereotypical views of what is appropriate for their gender, although they may know a wide range of choices is open to them. Discrepancies between adolescent expectations and realities would suggest that, as educators and counselors, we need to continue to prepare students and clients for a rapidly changing society and to aid them in developing their values, skills, interests, and life choices apart from sex role stereotypes.

Sex Equity and Counselor Attitudes

In working with clients and students to prepare for and to make choices about life roles, it is essential for counselors and educators to be aware of their own biases and stereotypes and how these attitudes may influence their work. Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz, & Vogel (1970) investigated the extent to which counselors and other mental health workers held stereotypic sex-role attitudes. The results of this, now classic, study reflect stereotypic views of men and women and equate the characteristics of a mentally healthy adult with those of a healthy male, implying very different standards of mental

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health for women and men. Following this study, there has been a burgeoning of studies on sex bias in counseling and education, with some researchers implying the furor was "much ado about nothing," and other researchers and practitioners pointing to countless examples of bias in counseling and therapy. Enough were convinced that during the 70's and early 80's, schools and colleges played major roles in addressing these issues (Sadker & Sadker, 1982; Klein, 1985).

The attention given to counselors' sex-role attitudes in the past two decades raises questions about what impact this has had on present counselor attitudes. Using methodology similar to Broverman et al., (1970), O'Malley and Richardson (1985) found, in contrast, that the subjects perceived healthy adults as possessing characteristics stereotypically associated with both men and women. However, similar to Broverman et al., counselors continued to respond in a stereotypic manner when asked to predict characteristics of an adult man or woman. In spite of mixed results, it appears that some counselors and educators continue to have stereotypic expectations of female and male clients and students.

New Face of Sex Equity Issues

The combination of societal changes and continuing, though more limited, interventions has made it necessary for counselors and educators to begin to rethink the current status of sex equity and their role in it. The new face of sex equity issues includes the following:

- Recognition that sex role and stereotyping issues affect men as well as women.
- Emergence of diverse family types, including two-earner families, single parents, and blended families.
- Growing recognition of the linkage between work and family and implications for life career planning and division of labor.
- Movement toward holistic life planning which emphasizes balance in life roles and a more integrated approach to life planning.
- Recognition of the need to challenge continuing examples of attitudes and behaviors which devalue girls and women.

Counselors/Educators as Change Agents

This brief review indicates that while much has been done to promote sex equity, much remains to be done. Counselors and educators committed to the development of human beings and the utilization of human potential, as well as to democratic values, can, if they are willing, assume a much more proactive role in effecting positive change. The following recommendations suggest ways in which counselors and educators can be change agents for sex equity:

- Examine their own attitudes and practices to assure that they have eliminated the subtle as well as blatant attitudes and stereotypes regarding both sexes.
- Assure that new knowledge about the changing roles of women and men, work/family intersection, stereotyping and socialization, and gender equity are a visible part of curriculum and programs.
- Advocate for public policy changes that bring policies more into consonance with the changing realities of women and men in work and family.
- Influence career guidance programs to include more about life roles, purpose and meaning in life choices, and integrative life planning—not just occupational choice and the paid work role.
- Teach students, teachers, and prospective teachers that they can be positive agents for change in developing more egalitarian relationships between women and men.

Resource Documents

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